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SUBJECT: ECUADOR: AMBASSADOR INAUGURATES NAS-FUNDED PIER

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Ambassador Jewell participated in the inauguration of an approximately \$3.4 million Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) funded 435 meter pier for the Ecuadorian Navy in the northern city of San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas province, 10 miles south of the Colombian border, on October 23, 2007. The pier will provide direct access to the rivers, estuaries and ocean at this strategically important location. In the inauguration ceremony, the Ambassador was accompanied by Ecuador's Minister of Defense, Dr. Wellington Sandoval, admirals and other dignitaries, who praised the USG and GOE's commitment to counter narcotics. The presence of high level GOE and local officials at this event demonstrates the GOE's commitment to counter narcotics and the Ecuadorian public's concern about rising illicit drug activity, especially in the Northern border region. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The 435 meter NAS-funded pier, built for the Ecuadorian Navy at the 11th Marine Battalion of San Lorenzo (BIMLOR), will greatly enhance Ecuador's ability to fight narcotraffickers' use of the coastal waterways between Colombia and Ecuador. The pier strengthens the ability of the Ecuadorian Navy and Coast Guard to patrol and control these waterways, as it provides 24 hour access to the waterways and refueling and maintenance capabilities that did not previously exist. The project fits into the Mission's strategy to mobilize GOE military and police forces along the northern border. Sharing a border with Colombia, the rivers, estuaries and ocean access of Esmeraldas province are of strategic importance for maritime traffickers. Maritime counternarcotics cooperation with the GOE has improved under the Correa administration and is forcing traffickers to begin to shift transport strategies.

¶3. (SBU) The inauguration ceremony was attended by Ecuador's Minister of Defense, Dr. Wellington Sandoval, and other military and civilian dignitaries. Speaking on behalf of the Ecuadorian Navy during the ceremony, Commander Dario Ortega praised the construction of the pier, saying that it would "strengthen operations against narco-trafficking, trafficking of fuels and contraband, and improve the livelihood of the people in the region." During the toast at the lunch following, Minister of Defense Sandoval expressed appreciation for the USG's contributions to counternarcotics in Ecuador and for bilateral cooperation.

¶4. (SBU) Ambassador Jewell emphasized in her remarks at the ceremony that the bilateral relationship has produced important results, that the increase in seizures and arrests has been accompanied by an increase in trafficking, and that we therefore must continue our cooperative fight against the illicit drug market. The Ambassador further stressed the

USG's commitment to the northern border through contributions in security as well as economic development programs and assistance to local governments.

¶15. (SBU) The Narcotics Affairs Section at the Embassy funded the pier project, which includes the pier deck and hammerhead that provide 483 lineal meters during high and low tides, and slips and fueling capabilities for eight 26-foot armed Ecuadorian Navy riverine patrol craft and one 82-foot patrol boat. The project also consisted of an access road, fueling facilities, on-shore fueling dispensing unit, pier lights, and a boat-lift structure for patrol boat maintenance. Project costs totaled \$3.4 million and took four years from beginning design to finish. The project contract was awarded to the Ecuadorian company Construtec. In addition to the pier, the Embassy provided three Proline river patrol boats (\$370,000) to the BIMLOR and has budgeted \$2 million to strengthen Coast Guard control of Ecuadorian waterways.

¶16. (SBU) In addition to Minister of Defense Sandoval, the inauguration ceremony was attended by Under Secretary of Defense General Jorge Pena, Ecuadorian Navy Commander Vice Admiral Homero Arellano, Ecuadorian Navy Chief of Staff Vice Admiral Luis Yepes, Commander of Northern Navy Operations Command of Esmeraldas (COOPNO) Captain Eduardo Vega, Commander of the 11th Marine Battalion of San Lorenzo (BIMLOR) Captain Dario Ortega, Esmeraldas Province Governor Ricardo Villacis, and San Lorenzo Mayor Gustavo Samaniego.

¶17. (U) Press coverage of the visit was broad; all but one national TV network broadcast the story, and the print media carried follow-up stories. Coverage was cautiously positive, communicating the message that the pier was a USG contribution to an Ecuadorian-controlled facility.

¶18. (SBU) COMMENT: While the Correa administration is highly sensitive to sovereignty issues, the attendance of both national and local government officials, as well as the comments by Defense Minister Sandoval and Ecuadorian Navy leadership, demonstrate the GOE's continued commitment to counter-narcotics and bilateral cooperation, as well as Ecuadorian concern about illicit activity along the northern border. END COMMENT.

JEWELL